DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 275 454 PS 016 171

AUTHOR Crist, Mary Jo; And Others
TITLE The Play Years: Two to Six. The Developing Child Series.
INSTITUTION CAPE Center, Inc., Dallas, TX.
PUB DATE 86
NOTE 69p.; For other handbooks in this series, see PS 016 168-172.
AVAILABLE FROM The C.A.P.E. Center, Inc., 5924 Royal Lane, Suite 216, Dallas, Texas 75230 ($4.95).
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Cognitive Development; Emotional Experience; Guidelines; Language Acquisition; *Learning Activities; *Personality Development; *Physical Development; *Social Development

ABSTRACT

One of a series written for parents and other caregivers, this handbook on child development focuses on children from 2 to 6 years of age. Contents describe (1) physical development in terms of body size and shape, brain and eyes, and motor skills; (2) cognitive development and language acquisition; (3) personality development, with particular attention to fear and anger; and (4) social development in peer groups and at play. Concluding material outlines play activities which support the development of toddlers and preschool children. A brief, selected bibliography is included. (RH)

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THE PLAY YEARS

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. . . Two to Six

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PREFACE

This handbook is one of a series written especially for parents and other caregivers. The series includes:

What Should I Do - A handbook on Emergency Care and Safety

Kitchen Magic - A handbook on Nutrition and Cooking

Listen to Me - PLEASE - A handbook on Communication

You Can't Make Me - A handbook on Behavior Management

The Developing Child Series - Handbooks on Child Development

"The Critical Years" - Birth to Two

"The Play Years" - Two to Six

"The School Years" - Six to Eleven

"The Searching Years" - Adolescence

We have given you an overview of some of the major areas involved in caring for children. You will find these handbooks useful on your first reading as well as a ready reference for the years to come.

Children are the most precious resource our country has. As parents and caregivers, we should be knowledgeable about children and their needs.

Mary Jo Crist, B.S.
Madeline E. Ehlert, M.Ed.
Judith K. Schneider, Ph.D.

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THE PLAY YEARS

. . . Two to Six

The period from two to six is often referred to as the preschool years because it is during this time that many children are involved in some sort of academic or daycare experience. The play years, however, may be a more appropriate title when one considers that play is the main vehicle that young children use to explore and develop the skills they need for surviving in today's complex world. Through play, they refine their motor skills, increase their social skills, gain much information about objects and people, develop greater competence in language and learn about the rules and customs of society.

Parents and caregivers sometimes have difficulty in dealing with children of this age because they are very unpredictable. They go from intense but quiet exploration to wild and frenzied activity within the space of a few moments. At times they exhibit a maturity that is far beyond their years and at other times portray a logic that only they can understand.

Example - An adult shouldn't be surprised that when asked what day it is, and responding that "It's Wednesday", this age child may reply, with a great deal of assurance, "It can't be Wednesday, silly. We always go to grandma's house on Sunday. If we're going to grandma's house today, today must be Sunday."

Their reasoning is significantly limited by the immaturity of their thought processing (cognitve) skills. However, despite the fact that their thinking makes little sense to us, they will defend it with great vigor. As a result, children of this age can be both a joy and a frustration. If we expect them to think logically, sit quietly or act sensibly, we may be sorely disappointed. If, on the other hand, we understand their playfulness and accept the immaturity of their thinking, viewing them as part of normal growth and development, they can provide us with a limitless source of pleasure.

PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT

Changes in Body Size and Shape

As children move through the play years, they seem to lose the round face, bulging tummy and disproportionately large head that characterizes the younger child. During the period from two to about age six, they add approximately three inches to their height and about eighteen pounds to their weight.

There are many factors which affect height - the two most influential being heredity and nutrition. Some other factors which should be considered are birth order, sex, general health and mother's consumption of cigarettes, alcohol or drugs.

When we consider that infants triple their weight by one year, the weight gain during this time is relatively slow. Much of the weight gain we see is due to an increase in bone and muscle tissue. Children lose their "baby fat" and their body proportions become more like those of an adult.

Along with a slowing down of weight gain comes a lessening of appetite. Parents and caregivers should not be surprised when they see

their children eating less at mealtime. More often than not, we show great distress when this occurs and a battleground is created over food. We need to remember that whenever we argue with children over food, we are bound to be the losers.

Children of this age want to be in control of their lives. Eating is one area in which this is possible. Generally, if left to their own devices, children eat when they are hungry. If food is made available to them, they will eat to satisfy their hunger. Children of this age also tend to have "favorite" foods, so it's not uncommon for them to have peanut butter sandwiches for lunch every day for 10 weeks and then switch to tuna fish for the next 10 weeks. One day they may dive into the fruit bowl with great enthusiasm and the next day look at it and say, "yuk." This is normal and parents and caregivers need not be concerned. If it persists over time and the diet appears to be lacking in one particular area, try to provide good sources of that particular food for them. Be sure, however, an issue isn't made over eating it. Chances are, if left alone, they will choose it for themselves.

**CAUTION - NEVER MAKE EATING A BATTLEGROUND.

The most common nutritional problem during these years is getting the children to eat enough quality foods. Too much fat, sugar and salt in the diet can produce health problems later on in life.

**CAUTION - GOOD NUTRITION DOESN'T MEAN MORE FOOD. IT MEANS MAKING SURE THAT THE RIGHT FOODS ARE EATEN IN THE APPROPRIATE AMOUNTS.

Changes in the Brain and Eyes

By the time children have reached age 5, the weight of the brain is about 90 percent of what it will be at adulthood. One of the reasons for the increase in brain weight during this time has to do with a process called MYELINATION. Myelination involves the building of an insulating sheath around the nerves which increases the speed by which neural impulses can be sent.

The process of myelination occurs over a long period of time and in a particular sequence. We can observe definitive changes in children's abilities due to myelination at certain ages.

- 1. Hand-eye coordination improves steadily up through age four because it is at this time that the areas of the brain associated with hand-eye coordination become fully myelinated.

- 2. The areas of the brain associated with language and intelligence do not become fully myelinated until age fifteen or so. Therefore we see a continual increase in these abilities during these years.

There are many school skills that are dependent on brain maturation.

1. Reading depends on the coordination of the eye muscles with specific areas of the brain.

2. Writing not only involves motor coordination but also an ability to coordinate sounds, letters and words with these motor skills.

**The ability to concentrate on one task over a period of time requires maturation of the brain and nervous system. It is a developmental process and cannot be hurried. How quickly it happens is dependent on each child's own particular developmental time clock.

During this time period, vision also improves. By the time children reach six years of age, their eye muscles are sufficiently well-developed to allow them to scan slowly over a series of letters.

• Example - The younger child is likely to guess at a word upon seeing the first letter in the series, whereas the older child will scan the whole word before making a decision.

Before about age six, children are limited by the fact that they tend to be extremely farsighted. Moreover, they have difficulty focusing on something over an extended period of time.

• Example - When symbols are small and there are a lot of them on a page, the younger child will have difficulty in focusing on one of them in order to pick out specific information.

Hand Preference

Hand preferences become more defined during this time. The majority of psychologists believe that children who show a left-handed preference are doing so because of genetic directions. They suggest that parents and caregivers support whichever hand preference children exhibit.

**LEFT-HANDED CHILDREN NEED EXTRA HELP AND PATIENCE WHEN IT COMES TO HANDWRITING.

Much of what children learn is modeled for them by others. Since most people are right-handed, many simple tasks like tying shoes, holding a pencil or using a scissors usually appear backward to the left-handed child. <u>If parents or caregivers notice a left-handed preference, it is helpful to use another leftie as a teaching model. When another leftie is not available, use a mirror or have the child stand facing you.</u>

Changes in Body Functioning

During this time span, children seem to be "healthier" than they were in their younger years and they begin to exhibit patterns of bodily function that more closely approximate those of the adult. Ear infections occur less often. Allergies to foods and juices seem to be lessening and trips to the doctor's office are less frequent. Diapers become obsolete and independent toileting a matter of course for many of them. Much of this is due to the physiologic maturation (growth of the body organs) that takes place during this period.

- 1. The immune system becomes more highly developed and thus there are fewer colds and sore throats.

- 2. The digestive system functions more effectively and with greater regularity. The stomach becomes larger in size and can hold more food. This results in fewer stomach upsets and greater time lapses between meals and snacks.

- 3. The distance between the inner ear and the outer ear increases and the tube that connects the nose, throat and ears becomes wider. This

results in better drainage for the fluids that collect in this area and therefore children experience fewer ear and throat infections.

**CAUTION - THE RATE OF PHYSIOLOGIC MATURATION WILL VARY FOR INDIVIDUAL CHILDREN. KEEP THIS IN MIND WHEN SETTING EXPECTATIONS FOR SLEEPING, EATING AND TOILETING.

Some Hints on Toilet Training

Successful toilet training requires that several factors be present before any attempt is made.

- 1. Parent or caregiver readiness - This means that parents and caregivers must be ready to let children take on the responsibility for their own toileting without continually "controlling" the situation with constant reminders or suggestions.

- 2. Child readiness -
  This means that children must be physically and cognitively able and emotionally ready to control their impulses to move their bowels or urinate.

  Physical readiness requires that the bladder be of adequate size to hold a reasonable amount of urine and the anal muscles which control the bowel have adequate strength.

  Cognitive readiness requires that the brain and nervous system be reasonably well-developed so that the message of urgency is understood and acted upon with reasonable speed.

  Emotional readiness requires that children be willing to:

  1. take on the responsibility for toileting themselves.
  2. cooperate with parents or caregivers in this endeavor.

The following list of questions may be helpful when trying to determine if "it's the right time".

1. Is the child aware that the diaper is soiled? Does he/she come and tell you? Does he/she want the diaper changed?

2. Can the child tell you when he/she is moving his/her bowels or urinating using words or gestures?

3. Is the diaper still dry after a two or three hour period?

4. Does the child show an interest or curiousity about the toilet and how it is used?

5. Does a messy or wet diaper distress the child?

Encouragement and time are key factors for successful toilet training. Parents and caregivers should remember to praise children often in order to keep their motivation at a high level. Giving children enough time is also important. Independent toileting generally doesn't happen overnight. It is not uncommon for children to have "accidents." In fact, we probably should expect it. At

times they become so involved in playing they forget what the feeling of urgency "feels like" and, at other times, they know they need to use the bathroom but they miscalculate the amount of time necessary to "get there." Patience, understanding and sensitivity will go a long way toward making this an "accomplishment" rather than an "issue."

**CAUTION - EACH CHILD IS UNIQUE AND WHAT WORKED WITH ONE CHILD MAY NOT WITH THE NEXT.

Parents or caregivers who experience difficulty with children during this time should re-evaluate the child's readiness and the methods they are using.

Changes in Motor Development

Gross motor skills (those skills which involve the coordination of the limbs like running, climbing, jumping and so forth) increase dramatically during this time. Fine motor skills (those skills which involve the coordination of the hands, eyes and fingers such as cutting, drawing, sewing, threading, pouring and the like) continue to become more efficient

but still present some difficulties for the preschooler.

Gross Motor Skills

In the case of gross motor skills development, practice does help to make perfect. Children of this age need to have opportunities for climbing, running, jumping, digging, swinging, hopping and balancing if we want their skills to improve. For the most part, they will learn by teaching themselves and from watching others. Adults can help by making sure that the children are safe, but adult instruction in the "how to's" is not usually necessary.

As in so many of the other developmental areas, the speed with which and the extent to which motor skills develop is determined by a combination of heredity and environment. As the old saying goes, "You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear." As parents and caregivers, we need to accept the fact that there will be differing levels of skills amongst children. The important thing to remember is that children need to feel secure in the fact that we support

their attempts and find no fault with their failures.

Fine Motor Skills

The development of the fine motor skills does not progress as quickly as gross motor development. Myelination of the central nervous system is not yet complete, particularly the areas that support muscle control and judgement. However, as in the case of the gross motor skills, opportunities for practice are crucial. Children during these years need varied experiences with cutting, sewing, manipulating objects, pouring, building, weaving, sculpting with clay and so forth.

**CAUTION - LIITLE CHILDREN HAVE LITTLE FINGERS. PLAYTHINGS SHOULD BE CHOSEN WITH THIS IN MIND. FRUSTRATION CAN LEAD TO ANGER AND ANGER TO NEGATIVE FEELINGS ABOUT ONESELF.

COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

What are they thinking?

The thinking patterns of children in the play years are rather primitive when compared to the thought processes of the adult. Children of this age tend to see things as either right or wrong or good or bad. They are limited because they do not think beyond what they see and what they see is taken at face value. It is rarely tempered by reason. They have little or no understanding of time - the past or the future - and are further hampered by their lack of long term memory.

Preschoolers also have major problems in viewing things from different perspectives. They believe that all people see things as they see them and know them as they know them. In other words, the only point of view they understand and accept is their own.

Parents and caregivers sometimes feel hurt, frustrated or angry because they are unaware of this particular cognitive limitation.

Example - An important business associate calls the house and the three year old answers the phone. The business associate says, "Is

your mommy or daddy at home?" The three year old shakes her head in a negative response, but says nothing. The caller repeats the the request a second and third time, but the same response is forthcoming. Finally, in exasperation, he hangs up feeling frustrated and angry.

The above scenario is not an uncommon one. The problem here is not that we have an uncooperative or delayed child, but rather a developmentally appropriate situation in which the child assumes that the listener, despite the fact that he is not present in the room, can see what he sees and know what he knows.

Another interesting problem for children of this age is their inability to understand that things put together in one order can be taken apart in a reverse order and resume their original state (reversibility).

- Example - Let's suppose it's Halloween and we decide to dress up as a witch to be part of the fun. Janey, the three year old, takes one look and starts to cry. We do everything in our power to convince her that we're just in a costume but she continues to cry. It's only after we remove the costume and return to our former self that she stops her sobbing.

The above problem probably had less to do with her being scared of the

witch and more to do with her feeling that she had lost us forever. The inability to understand that things can be reversed presents severe limitations on children's ability to interpret experiences.

Another problem that often distorts their logic is their inability to look at more than one aspect of something or to think about more than one idea at a time.

- Example - Preschoolers think that people who are older are bigger and most times this is true. This idea is reinforced by their visual encounters with adults. Because of this, we might have some difficulty in convincing them that even though we are bigger than grandma, we are not older.

This peculiarity is also evident in other areas. They may have difficulty in understanding that a parent is also the son or daughter of a grandparent or that an object, such as block, can be red and square and wooden all at the same time.

Because of their difficulty in seeing more than one characteristic of anything at more than one time and their lack of understanding with regard to reversibility, children of this age think of themselves as either "good" or "bad", not realizing that they can be both at the same time. Parents and caregivers need to be sure that they tell children that THEY are "good" but the BEHAVIOR that they are exhibiting is not acceptable. Once children feel that they are "bad", it is very difficult for them to understand that they don't have to be "bad" forever.

One of the most important developmental milestones for children this age is the ability to create mental images and keep them over time. Unlike younger children whose thinking is tied to their actions and perceptions, these children can figure things out mentally. Their newly found language skills enhance their thinking skills and give them even greater opportunities for exploring their world.

With the coming of symbolic thought (the use of mental rather than actual representations) we see an increase in creativity (imagination) and pretend play. Whereas younger children had difficulty pretending that a block was an airplane, children of

this age have no difficulty at all. In fact, it is not so unusual to see them, arms spread wide, zooming through the air making "rrum, rrum" engine noises.

There are some practical applications regarding children's logic that parents and caregiver's should keep in mind.

- 1. Children on the younger end of the play years have difficulty understanding other people's feelings. If something comforts them, they assume it will also comfort someone else.

  Example - If they see a parent feeling sad, they may bring him/her a favorite bear assuming that because it makes them feel better, it will do the same for the parent.

- 2. Children are more likely to to understand and accept something if we make it personal and relate it to something that they know.

  Example - Johnny can better understand that hitting hurts when we say, "You may not hit. When Bobby hits you, it hurts you and when you hit Bobby, it hurts him too."

- 3. Children, because of the limits of their logic, cannot understand much of what they see on the television. They have a great deal of difficulty

with cause and effect relationships. Therefore, they don't always see the link between "the bad guys" and the punishment they receive. This becomes even more of a problem when the period of time between the behavior and the punishment is lengthy.

Example - Let's suppose the family is watching a crime show on the T.V. When the show is over, the children go outside to play. Suddenly, there is a great uproar coming from the backyard. Johnny has pushed Sally off the ladder to the fort and she's crying inconsolably. After making sure that she's all right, we turn to Johnny and ask, "Why did you push Sally off the ladder. You knew she would be hurt. Johnny's response of , "Well, the man on the T.V. pushed the lady off the wall and she didn't get hurt," really shouldn't surprise us.

Unfortunately, the scene shifted after the lady was pushed off the wall and it was several scenes later that we saw her in the hospital. In order to avoid what can sometimes be tragic misunderstandings from T.V. viewing, parents and caregivers need to spend some extra time making sure that the moral they wish to be learned is, indeed, the one that the children take away with them.

• 4. Young children of this age tend to be rather haphazard. They have difficulty organizing their things and themselves. Moreover, they are not particularly systematic in their approach to problem-solving.

Example - Let's suppose our four year old has lost his lunchbox. He comes and tells us and we suggest he look for it. After five minutes, he comes back and says that he still can't find it. We've watched him search and know he hasn't even looked in the most obvious places.

We need to understand that it's not that he doesn't want to find the lunchbox or that he's too lazy to look for it. Rather, he doesn't yet understand <u>how</u> to figure out where the lunchbox might be and then how to search for it in a logical and systematic way.

Many of the cognitive limitations that children of this age experience will lessen or completely disappear as a result of maturation. By the time most children are about six years old, we can expect them:

- to be more aware of differing perspectives (know that the man on the other end of the phone can't see them),
- to understand that objects and things can have more than one characteristic by which they can be grouped (know that a block can be wooden, red and square at the same time), and
- to understand the concept of reversibility (know that the witch can become "you" again).

The ability to process information on a more sophisticated level gives children the ability to face the challenges that will be presented to them during the School Years.

LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

It is during the Play Years that children appear to master spoken language. They go from one word utterings in the first year to having a vocabulary of between 8,000 to 14,000 words in their sixth year. Just as in other developmental areas, language development follows a specific pattern or sequence.

- Example - Children learn nouns more easily than verbs and verbs more easily than the remaining parts of speech. The parts of speech themselves also follow a particular sequence. Children learn basic nouns (cat) before they learn specific nouns (Persian) or general nouns (animals). The question words (who, what, why, when, where and how) follow in sequence, too - "where" and "what" come first, then "who", "how" and "why."

The mastery of language requires that children accomplish four major tasks. The first of these is an understanding of the sound system of the language (phonology). Children must learn not only how to make the sounds of the language but also how to

interpret them correctly when there are superficial differences.

- Example - People from different places may vary in their speech sounds, but the variation does not necessarily signal a difference in meaning. Daddy may be from the South and substitute a short e for a short i, as in the word pin. Mom, on the other hand, comes from the North and uses the short e.

The second of these tasks involves learning what words mean. In order to do this, children make a decision about word meaning by relating the word to other objects and events.

- Example - Let's suppose a child hears the word "Spot", but doesn't know what it means. He/she will listen to when the word is used and watch what happens in response to its use (mommy says "Spot"and the dog runs over). After observing for a while, the child will probably use the word to call the dog. The child may become

confused a few weeks later when he/she hears mommy complaining about a spot on her dress and the dog doesn't come running. Again, after listening to how the word is used and relating it to his/her world, the child will come to the understanding that the word, spot, when used this context, has a different meaning.

A third linguistic task involves an understanding of the rules which govern the way in which:

1. words in a language can be put together,

2. certain words can be combined, and

3. endings such as s, es, ed, er or ing can be added to words to give them added meaning.

The rules governing language allow us to use a minimum of words in an infinite variety of ways in order to produce many different meanings.

- Example - Let's take a simple sentence like "The girl walked the dog." Through syntactic rules, we can use these words in a wide variety of ways.

1. The dog walked the girl.
2. The dog didn't walk the girl.
3. The girl didn't walk the dog.
4. Did the girl walk the dog?
5. Did the dog walk the girl?

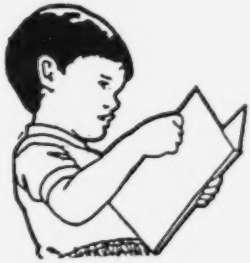
The fourth task concerns learning how to use the rules in order to make our language more effective. This would include learning how to use intonation (the rising and falling of our voices) and emotionality (happy, sad or angry tones) to enhance meaning as well as the kinds of information we need to include in our sentences to make ourselves understood.

- Example - Children will interpret a sentence like "I'm sorry but you can't go outside today," in very different ways according to where the emphasis is placed and what tone of voice is used.

  "I'm sorry but YOU can't go outside to play today" is very different in meaning from "I'm sorry but you can't go OUTSIDE to play today."

These language tasks are learned over time although great strides are made during the Play Years. Toward the end of the second year (around eighteen months to two years), children begin to speak in pairs of words rather than the

single words we heard when they were younger. Two word sentences like "Daddy, bye-bye" and "Mommy working" are very common at this age. By the time most children are two and a half years of age, they have a vocabulary of about 400 words and it grows very rapidly from this time on.



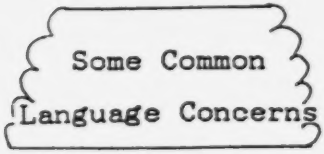
By the third year (around two and a half to three), along with an increase in vocabulary comes the addition of some grammatical rules particularly regarding tense and plurality. However, children of this age tend to apply the rules in too general a way and so we hear things like "Bobby runned home" or "I seed two mouses."

During the fourth year (three to four), language continues to improve. Sentences remain grammatically simple but use of the future tense (Will mommy come?), negatives with auxilliary verbs (Mommy can't go.) and questions in adult form (Why is Mary crying?) become more common. Vocabulary growth continues to increase rapidly and, by three and a half, most children will have command of about 1,000 words.

By the time children reach the age of six, their language skills closely approximate those of the adult. Their

sentences become increasingly complex and they will often combine two or more thoughts into one sentence (You may think we're going to go, but I know we can't go today.). Along with increased complexity in sentence construction comes a vocabulary of 8,000 to 14,000 words.

The growth of language skills during the Play Years gives children the opportunity to explore the world with greater sophistication. While language and thought are not dependent on one another, they do influence each other. This fact underscores the need for providing children with a wide variety of language experiences. These should include, but not be limited to, books, poetry, songs, finger plays, drama, conversation and creative language experiences.



Normal Non-fluency

As language develops during the early years, many children have some difficulty in expressing themselves. Most often, this difficulty will occur during moments of stress, after an illness or in a moment of extreme excitement. Parents and caregivers must REMEMBER THAT NON-FLUENT SPEECH IS NORMAL DURING THE EARLY YEARS. They

should not become too concerned or try to correct the child's speech. Simple statements like "Try saying it over again," "Try to say it a little more slowly," or "Try to say it without stuttering," are sometimes well-meaning but do more harm than good. The child may begin to feel that his/her speech is displeasing to the adult or that there is something wrong with them. This may lead to feelings of inadequacy about him/herself and even greater hesitation in speaking with others. Once children hear themselves labeled as "stutterers," they become very self-conscious about their speech and rather than talk in an unacceptable way, they often stop communicating altogether.

**CAUTION: Remember that some repetition(a-a-a, uh-uh-uh) and prolongation (ba-a-a-by, mo-o-omy) are normal and should not be considered stuttering.

Delayed Speech and Language:

Most children begin to talk (at least one or two words) by the time they are 15 months old and, usually by the age of three, their speech is fairly efficient. Children who are not following this pattern may have some language or speech delays. Many

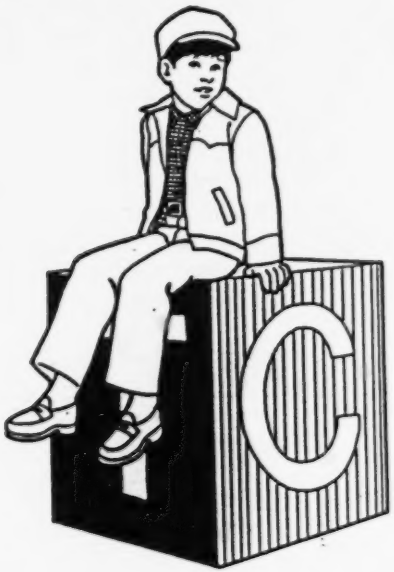
factors contribute to speech and language delays such as hearing loss, retardation, emotional problems, poor environment, lack of speech stimulation and frequent or prolonged illness.

Children who have delayed speech and language often use grunts and gestures as their main means of communication. They may have some limited skills but their sentences may be incomplete or of poor quality. They may have difficulty understanding and following directions or their speech may be very hard to understand (leaving out sounds or substituting one sound for another). Sometimes the words can be so distorted that they are impossible to understand.

These types of language problems should be evaluated by experts in the field. Sometimes they are caused by malformations of the lips, tongue, jaws or soft palate or they are caused by poor coordination of the lips, jaws and tongue. They may also be due to hearing problems. In any case, it generally takes someone who is knowledgeable in the field of speech

pathology to make a appropriate diagnosis.

The development of language skills follows much the same pattern as other developmental areas. Some children will move through the developmental process with great speed, talking up a storm early on. Other children will move through more slowly, talking only when they are good and ready, although they make their needs known without the use of speech. It is important that parents and caregivers respect and understand individual differences in this area. The need for providing a rich linguistic environment for children should not be underestimated. Language cannot be learned in silence. It requires on-going opportunities for hearing and using words and sounds in order to communicate our needs, feelings, and ideas.



PERSONALITY DEVELOPMENT

As we noted in THE CRITICAL YEARS - Birth to Two, the process of becoming independent and separate from our parents begins during infancy and continues throughout our lifetime. It is during the Play Years, however, that many of the feelings we have about our ability to accomplish this are developed.

By about age two or three, most children see themselves as separate people. How well they can function separately (without parent or caregiver direction) is dependent on how much support parents and caregivers give them in this quest for independence.

From birth on, children are actively seeking to gain control of their bodies and of the environment. By about eighteen months of age, they are able to move themselves from place to place without help. They are able to make their wants and needs known in an effective fashion and they have some rudimentary problem-solving skills. Along with all of this comes a new psychological challenge - the need to find out if "I can do it myself."

The way children feel about their ability to "do it myself" (self-image or self-esteem) comes from how other people in their lives support their attempts at independence. When

parents and caregivers are critical of failures or unwilling to allow children opportunities to explore on their own, children begin to feel a sense of inadequacy or doubt about their ability to do things on their own. If, on the other hand, parents and caregivers support active exploration and experimentation and view failure as part of the learning process, children become confident in their ability to meet life's challenges.

While our self-image continues to grow and/or change throughout life, these early years provide the foundation on which basic feelings are built. Therefore, it is very important to make sure that what we say to children is supportive rather than destructive of their burgeoning sense of self-worth.

- Examples:

Positive Phrases

You're a good helper.
Fantastic!
That's good. You did it by yourself.
You did a great job on that!

Each of the above phrases lets the child know that the adult supports the action or behavior and the child.

Negative Phrases

Must you always be so clumsy?
Can't I trust you by yourself for even a minute?
Why can't you behave?
I told you that would happen.

Each of the behaviors lets the child know in clear and certain terms that he/she is incompetent and/or inadequate.

At about three or four children add another dimension to their quest becoming separate and independent people. They begin to take some initiative in their activities. They may use materials in a totally new and creative way. They may try out new approaches to old games. Or, they may create other kinds of fabulous, wild and imaginative play experiences. Again, the reactions of parents and caregivers are of paramount importance.

When children feel that their initiative is supported by the adults they love, they gain a sense of confidence in their ability to explore new and yet-to-be conquered worlds. If their attempts meet with constant criticism and disapproval, they feel guilty because they have failed to meet the standards they know the people they

love (parents and caregivers) expect. Along with the feeling of guilt comes a sense of inadequacy and a loss of self esteem.

All during the Play Years children seek to find out about themselves. Initially, they learn their names and body parts. They then move to identifying things that they "own" (my mommy, my dolly, my book, my toy). Eventually, they begin to classify themselves according to other criteria such as size (I'm big.), age (I'm four.) and sex (I'm a girl.). This process of identification continues throughout life but its roots lie within the Play Years.

The most significant consequence of this early identification process is the development of sex typing (the learning of male and female roles), including personality characteristics, attitudes and beliefs. There are many factors which influence how children perceive their sex role. Parents and caregivers need to be aware that children get messages about appropriate sex roles from books, music, T.V., billboards, games, toys and from family and peers. We need to be sure that the kinds of experiences and materials we provide for children model the kinds of beliefs and attitudes we wish to support.

As children go through the Play Years, parents and caregivers may experience some difficulty in relating to their children's new-found independence. Some techniques for managing children's behavior are more effective than others. Another of the

books in this series, You Can't Make Me - A Behavior Management Handbook may be helpful. A good rule of thumb is to follow the Golden Rule:

"Do Unto Others As You Would Have Them Do Unto you."

Children are people in their own right. They have needs and feelings which must be respected by those who love and care for them. If we think of how we would feel if those words were

spoken to us, we can get a general sense about how children will react to them.

The emotional reactions and patterns of expression that children of this age exhibit are very different from those we see in younger children. The two most distinguishable changes are fear and anger.

Because of their immature cognitive skills, many objects and events that children cannot understand become distorted and magnified. Moreover, they now have the ability to keep mental images in their minds over time. Along about age three or four, children begin to have nightmares. They have difficulty in separating what is real from what is fantasy which sometimes further frustrates the parent or caregiver who is desparately trying to calm them down. Unfortunately, it is very hard to reason with someone whose reasoning skills are not fully developed.

Phobias also develop during this time. The most common are fear of the dark and fear of imaginary creatures, although fears of robbers, death, certain animals and physical injury are also problematic.

Some Things Parents and Caregivers Can Do To Help

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1. Understand and respect the fact that these fears are very real for children. Making fun of or shaming them is not helpful.

2. Realize, that in most instances, children will outgrow their fears. Adults should show patience, forebearance and empathy.

3. Allow children time to conquer their fears. Children should not be forced into situations that frighten

them. If they are afraid of the water, throwing them into the pool is not helpful.

4. Look at their fears in relationship to their overall personality. If there are particular situations that consistently make them fearful, try to avoid them as much as possible.

5. Try to figure out the source of the fear. Sometimes a fear will come from a particular situation (school, an outing or the like). Take some time to analyze where the fear might have originated and the circumstances that may have caused it.

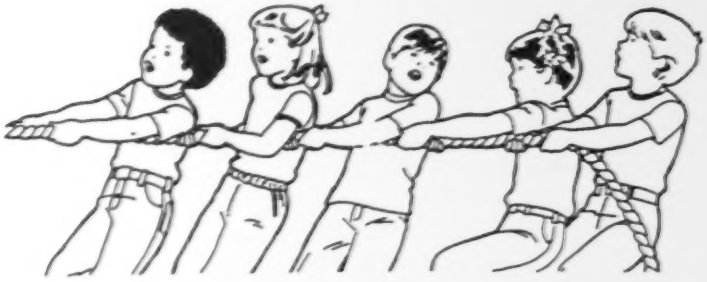
6. Remember that adults provide role models for children. If, as adults, we deal rationally with our fears, children will learn by our example.

During the Critical Years, children most often expressed their anger through crying or through temper tantrums. During the Play Years, the ways by which children express their anger changes. By about age two and a half or three, physical outbursts such

as kicking, biting and hitting tend to be on the decline. Some of the behaviors will persist, but they are used less and less as children get older. These children will continue to use temper tantrums as an outlet, but they, too, occur with less frequency.

Four and five year olds tend to use words rather than physical means for expressing their anger. Threats and insults become commonplace. It isn't unusual to hear two children arguing and saying, "My daddy is bigger than your daddy and if you don't stop that he'll beat your daddy up."

Again, helping children deal with their anger is part of our role as parents and caregivers. Children need to find socially acceptable means for expressing their anger. Anger is normal and we feel it at times. The important thing is to find outlets for our anger that are appropriate and socially acceptable. The You Can't Make Me - A Behavior Management Handbook in this series contains some ideas on how to do this.



SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

It is during the Play Years that children begin to move out of the home and away from the family. Many of them are involved in some sort of daycare or preschool experience, giving them an opportunity to interact with children and adults outside of the immediate family environment. This results in them being exposed to many new social challenges as well as conflicts and anxieties.

Early group experiences are important for children because they provide them with:

- information on how their behavior affects others,
- information on how their behavior is accepted by others,
- a wider and more complex variety of sensory stimulation,
- opportunities for independence,
- added models for their growing sense of identity, and
- input that directly affects the development of their self-concept.

The way children react to their first contacts with other children is varied. Some children will join the group eagerly while others may scream and ask to leave. Still others may watch from a safe distance, enjoying being a spectator rather than a participant. Many times, the temperament of the child will dictate the ease with which he/she enters the group situation.

When children finally become confortable in a group setting, their first attempts at making social contacts are generally clumsy and awkward. This isn't surprising since they have had little or no experience with this before. Sometimes, for lack of knowledge about any other techniques available to them, they resort to biting, kicking, hitting or spitting to get what they want. Parents and caregivers need to understand that many times these behaviors (unpleasant and unacceptable as they may be) come from ignorance of any other way rather than out of "meaness" on the part of the child.

Self-concept is influenced in great measure by the feedback that we receive from others around us. For children of this age, the reaction of the peer group is very important. If playmates run away from, strike back at or constantly reject the child, self-esteem is sure to suffer. Parents and caregivers who exhibit patience, a willingness to help children find appropriate ways to meet their needs and an understanding of the difficult task that children face in becoming "socialized" make an enormous contribution to the healthy development of social skills.

Establishing a Peer Group

It is generally not until about age three or three and a half that children really begin to actively seek out a peer group. Whether or not a child is accepted into a particular peer group will depend on several factors. In most instances, they are bound by a common play interest. However, above and beyond that, sex, friendliness, acceptance of group routine, physical attractiveness, lack of dependence on adults and social class all contribute to the ease with which a child is accepted into the peer group. The particular role assigned to the child within the group (leader or follower) will be largely determined by many of the same qualities that we find among adults. Leaders tend to be above average in intelligence, authoritarian and assertive and the same is true for children.

Peer Groups and Behavior

As children move through the Play Years, they become less and less dependent on adults for meeting their needs and more and more dependent on the peer group. Children who exhibit a great deal of dependency on adults are likely to have difficulty gaining acceptance from the group.

During the earlier part of the Play Years (from about two to three and a half or four), children seem to have some difficulty empathizing with the feelings of others. They are hampered by their a lack of cognitive maturity (the inability to see things from another person's perspective seems to get in their way). As a result, they may show little or no understanding when they "hurt" someone's feelings. They do, however, show some sympathy when other children are crying, frightened or visably upset. Their sensitivity does increase over the next few years as their thought processes mature and as their experiences with other children broaden.

The extent to which children are able to relate to the feelings of others is largely dependent on the exposure they have had to adult role models and to certain social situations. Children can learn how to be helpful and cooperative if they have an opportunity to:

- receive guidance and positive reinforcement from adults,
- interact with other children, and

- observe adults and children behaving in a socially appropriate manner.

Parents and caregivers who provide a warm, nurturing and altruistic role model are likely to be imitated by the children in their care.

No discussion of the social development of children during the Play Years would be complete without looking at the function that play serves in the developmental process. Lawrence Frank, a reknowned social psychologist, said that, "Play is the way a child learns what no one can teach him." Play, then, makes an enormous contribution toward the learning and thinking abilities of children. However, play also serves several other functions.

1. It allows children an opportunity to work out anxieties and conflicts.

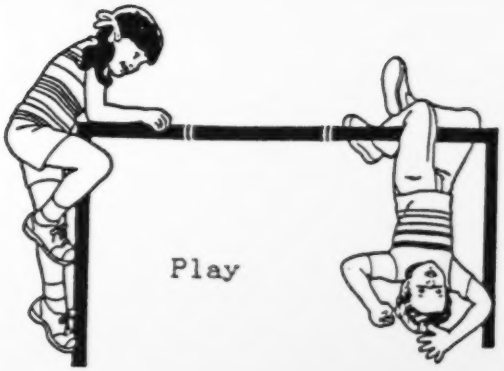
2. It allows children an opportunity to explore the world.

3. It provides children with opportunities for practicing some of the skills they will need to meet the challenge of the future.

4. It provides children with an opportunity to practice some of the roles they may be asked to assume as adults.

In the beginning, most of the play we see with infants is exploratory and basically appeals to the senses and fundamental motor skills. Their bodies, the immediate environment and the people around them provide a rich resource for them. During toddlerhood, exploratory play becomes much more diverse. As toddlers begin to gain control of their bodies and need to rely less on adults for mobility, their horizons for exploration expand enormously. Moreover, new types of activities emerge. Blocks, sand, water, clay, glue and a myriad of other materials become sources of great pleasure. Music, too, provides another avenue for expression.

The play of the preschooler adds yet another dimension. They begin to become involved in more socially oriented activities. Their increased cognitive function allows for a higher level of games playing and the ability to enter the world of fantasy and make-believe. They use play as a means for increasing their cognitive skills, enhancing their social skills, increasing their physical skills and supporting their emotional health.



Play

The value of play for young children should not be underestimated. Parents and caregivers must allow time and opportunity for a broad variety of play experiences. Children need freedom rather than structure in a stimulating environment. An environment which is filled with opportunities for exploration provides children with the wealth of information they need for future survival.

The development of play follows a particular sequence, similar to the other developmental patterns we have discussed.

- The first stage is called <u>Unoccupied Behavior</u> because the children are not actually involved in the play but rather observer of whatever events happen to catch their eye. When nothing of interest seems to be happening, they turn to playing with their limbs and fingers, following an adult or climbing on and off a chair.
- The second stage is called <u>Solitary Play</u> because the children play independently with their toys. They are very self-centered and show almost no interest in other children that are nearby.

- The third stage is called Onlooker Behavior because the children observe others closely and watch what they are doing with great interest, but they don't really join in the activity. Rather, they listen carefully to what the participants are saying while playing, but they do not become active participants themselves.
- The fourth stage in the development of play is called Parallel Play. In this stage, children play independently of one another, but their play often brings them into contact with other children nearby. They play alongside of rather than with the other children in an activity.
- The fifth stage is called Associative Play. This stage is characterized by interaction and cooperation. Children in this stage of play are able to share, borrow, and lend things to others.
- The last stage of play is called Cooperative Play and in this stage children are usually quite organized. The group is formed on the basis of a specific task and each member of the play group is assigned a specific role. It is during this time that leadership can easily be noticed.

While this discussion of play is by no means complete, it does serve to underline the value of play for children. Parents and caregivers who:

- understand children's limitations,
- are willing to take an active role in providing rich play experiences for children, and

- have the patience and forebearance to wait for each child's individual self to emerge

provide the greatest gift that adults can give to children.

As parents and caregivers, we need to be aware of the responsiblity we have in fostering early learning and healthy development. There are a few fundamental principles to remember when planning activities for young children.

1. Children learn from experiences that are clearly defined, not abstract, and involve active participation.

2. Activities must be on the child's developmental level in order to be meaningful.

3. Each child is unique and has his/her own learning style.

4. For the most part, children learn by doing rather than watching.

5. There is a knack to finding the right activity for the right time. Knowing about children is the first step in making this task easier.

Supporting Physical Development

When one looks at an infant lying in the crib, it's hard to believe that in six years or so that same child will be climbing trees, jumping in the air, hopping and skipping, climbing up and down steps and pick up pine needles from the ground one by one. The development of these skills comes about only through much practice on the child's part. Parents and caregivers should provide activities which encourage small (fine motor) and large (gross motor) muscle control.

Gross Motor Activities:

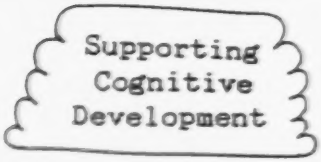
Pulling a wagon
Riding wheeled toys
Running, skipping, swinging
Climbing trees, jungle gyms, ladders; using see-saws
Inflated balls or dolls
Digging equipment
Beanbags, rubber horseshoes, doll carriages, sawhorses
Kicking balls
Swimming
Imitation games
Music and Dance

Small Motor Skills:

Hammer and peg sets
Playing with cars, trucks, trains, boats, etc.
Blocks
Fingerpains
Using paintbrushes, crayons, etc.
Cutting with scissors, pasting
Building sets (wood, plastic or metal)
Jigsaw puzzles
Stringing beads
Needlework (sewing, needlepoint)
Woodworking
Pouring activities (cooking, serving and so forth)

When planning physical activities for children, be sure:

- the area is safe,
- the child is developmentally ready, and
- the equipment is appropriate for the task.



It is during the Play Years that the basic foundation for later learning is set. Parents and caregivers should plan activities that support the concepts needed in later years. There are many books that list activities that support cognitive growth. However, creativity is part of the fun of planning activities for children. Use books sometimes, but BE CREATIVE ON YOUR OWN. Be sure to include activities that help children:

Understand relationships

- comprehension and use of weight words (light, heavy, etc.)
- comprehension and use of direction words (over, under, etc.)
- comprehension and use of size, shape and position words (big, bigger and biggest, etc.)
- comprehension of time as measurable
- comprehension of sequencing of events
- comprehension and use of amount words (same, more, less, etc.)
- comprehension and use of opposites
- putting things in order of most to least
- comprehension and use of distance words (near, far, etc.)

Sort and Classify

- on the basis of function, ownership, storage place, and color
- same things together on the basis of size, shape and texture
- on the basis of not belonging
- classifying different representations of the same thing

Count and Measure

- counting things
- one to one correspondence
- comparing lengths, etc.
- associating number names with real things
- recognizing and identifying numbers and quantities
- putting numbers in sequence
- identifying and recognizing equivalence
- joining groups of things
- comparing numbers
- matching numbers

Problem-solve

- identifying problems
- explaining solutions
- perceiving patterns
- observing details
- recalling details
- predicting patterns
- imitating patterns
- following visual directions
- understanding cause and effect
- anticipating future events
- acting on solutions

Explore the world

- becoming aware of the environment
- discovering the properties of things
- asking questions to find answers
- experimenting to find out
- discovering new aspects of familiar things
- developing curiousity
- testing hypotheses
- observing to find answers
- understanding how things work
- drawing conclusions

There are an infinite variety of activities that can support cognitive development at this age. As parents and caregivers, we are only limited by the confines of our own imaginations.

Supporting Language Development

Books, creative dramatics, conversation, poetry, rhymes, songs, fingerplays and the like all support the healthy growth of language. Parents and caregivers can lend further support to the development of language by:

- listening to what children say carefully
- making talking an enjoyable experience
- building self-confidence by praising successes
- talking to children
- demonstrating the meaning of words
- discussing shapes, colors and sizes
- asking children to point out similarities and differences
- working with words that start with the same sounds
- building on what children already know
- encouraging children to speak in complete sentences
- playing simple games to develop memory skills
- encouraging children to describe things
- asking children what they see rather than telling it to them
- talking to children and letting them tell you about their experiences

Supporting Personality Development

The Play Years are an important time for supporting the development of positive self-esteem. Activities that parents and caregivers plan should help children to:

- develop an awareness of self and a sense of importance
- develop skills for independent care of bodily needs
- develop means for expressing feelings
- develop a separate identity
- develop a feeling of pride in oneself
- identify the people who make a family
- develop a sense of confidence in their own ability

Supporting children in terms of their growing sense of self is perhaps the most important contribution parents and caregivers can make to children's development during this time. People who feel good about themselves seem to be able to overcome whatever obstacles they face. A child who feels positive about him/herself will approach the world in much the same way. Parents and caregivers should praise successes and support failures. Failure is part of the learning process. Children must be willing to take the risk of failing if they are to explore new horizons. The parent or caregiver who is willing to allow a child the opportunity to risk (as long as safety is not an issue) and who is supportive of failure as part of learning is a major force in promoting that child's positive self-esteem.

Supporting Social Development

Since the Play Years provide children with their first real opportunity for developing social skills in groups outside the family, it is important that parents and caregivers get them involved in some type of group experience. Children cannot learn social skills if they do not have peers with whom they can interact.

In support of social exploration, children should have many opportunties to use their imagination and creative abilities. Be sure to have:

- Dress-ups - hats, shoes, clothes, beads, glasses or goggles and gloves
- Housekeeping items - mop, broom, dishes, cooking utensils, etc.
- Communication items - telephone, typewriter, walkie-talkie, etc.
- Role-specific dress-ups - fire hat doctor's kit, policeman's hat, etc.
- Puppets

Group games of all types (make sure the rules are simple and easy to follow) are an excellent means for getting children involved with one another in a cooperative way. Circle games, dancing and group sports are also helpful in getting children to participate.

Communication is one of the keys to social success. Parents and caregivers should provide environments in which children can practice their communication skills. Opportunities for pretend play are a rich source for this.

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These are the Play Years. They are filled with activity and exploration. Parents and caregivers who are knowledgeable about children and willing to take the time to understand and support the growing process will find these years filled with excitement and enormous pleasure.

Notes and ideas
of your own.....

Notes .... cont. ...

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